

Lent 4 A
April 3, 2011
Family of Christ Lutheran Church
Chanhassen, Minnesota
Pastor Kristie Henning

**“Disciples Share Faith Near & Far”
1 Corinthians 5: 17-20a; John 9:1-41**

Here at FOC, we are “Making Disciples Making a Difference” – all of us, kids and grownups.

During Lent we’ve gone to the attic
and hauled out our six habits of faith,
one by one,
and unpacked them.

So far we’ve talked about weekly worship,
studying the Bible with open hearts and minds,
and talking *and* listening to God in prayer.

Today, we unpack the habit we call “sharing faith near & far.”

From life experience we know that while we may make our habits,
in the end, our habits make us.

As that great philosopher Shaquille O’Neal says,
“You are what you repeatedly do.”

Uh-oh...

Sharing faith...

It’s more than filling out the “preferred religion” box
on a form in the ER,
or answering “I’m Lutheran”
when someone brings up the subject of “church.”

Sharing faith near...

may be engaging the kids in a conversation in the car

on the way home from Christos or confirmation
about something in the lesson that surprised them.

It may be taking responsibility for getting the family to worship more
often – every Sunday being the ultimate goal --
and to encourage everyone to stay focused and involved
while they're here by modeling that yourself:
not standing by like a stick in the mud during songs,



but singing out with gusto,
adding to the joyful noise we make together.



It's *good* news we have to share, after all.
As the old hymn goes, “How can we *keep* from singing?”

Sharing faith near...
might be to write an email or card
to your godchild to share a verse of scripture
or tell a story about where you saw God that day.

Sharing faith...
may at times go deeper
as people in relationships of trust
wrestle with their doubts
and probe questions of meaning...together.

That may happen in families and with gatherings of “church friends.”

I hope my spouse and children have memories of conversations like this that we have had.

Did we...*do* we talk about the God-stuff that really matters, or do we just talk about “church”?

I want the people I love to know my story of faith – the parts that belong to the past and what I am learning now.

And I want to know their faith stories, too.

But do I....?

Have I thought to ask???

Here at church, sharing faith is alive and well and happening in lots of places -- staff meetings, Sunday School, the Saturday morning men’s group (a.k.a. the Spartans), women’s Bible studies, Common Thread, Around coffee and donuts in the narthex, committee meetings and council, among the Prayer Partners and the prayer shawl knitters, adult small groups of all kinds, and more – as people in relationship with other people share our hopes and our hurts, our successes and disappointments... and seek out help piecing together the whys and wherefores of life in God.

Conversations can be interesting when they involve FOC folks, inasmuch as some of us come from faith traditions other than Lutheran Christian, including Buddhism and Bahai, Mormon and Russian Orthodox, not to mention Roman Catholicism and Christian Pentecostalism and every flavor of Protestant church.

I myself have journeyed here from other traditions.
As a younger person I was a Methodist who also sampled Unitarianism
and the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses.
I've been a member of two Evangelical Free churches,
lived in a Hindu-Muslim country,
and (dare I admit it to you?) *there's more*.
It's been a journey for me, too, and here I am...
having chosen the Lutheran flavor of Christianity.

We have people among us
who grew up with little or no faith perspective –
at least as we usually describe it.
You might have called yourselves atheist or agnostic,
humanist or free-thinkers,
or maybe you considered yourself “none of the above” on any list.
And now you're here.

Jesus asks us to share faith with *all* of our neighbors –
near and far, affiliated or not, believing or skeptical.
And to be in the habit of doing that.

But we must open our eyes and listen to the faith or non-faith of others,
and that's a struggle for many Christians.
Because we've been taught that our message, our faith story,
is superior to all others.
And as a result of the way some of us carry ourselves and sing our song,
people quite understandably view us as arrogant and intolerant.
But “sharing faith” doesn't have to mean – and shouldn't, I dare say --
sitting on somebody,
forcing a change of heart,
demanding a decision or conversion
(as if transformation ever happens by force).

Learning the Spanish word *compartir* from Pastor Matias in El Salvador

has broadened the concept of faith-sharing for me.

Compartir is translated “to share” – simple enough on the surface.

But when you take the word apart,
you get *com*, which means “with”

plus *partir*, which means to divide or make edges.

So *compartir* means to bring the edges together,

to give up something to the other, and also receive from the other.

To share with another.

To treat your conversation partner with the same respect you would want to be treated with.

Hmm...Sounds like Jesus’ Golden Rule, doesn’t it?

When the subject of sharing faith comes up,

my husband, Gene, tells the story of the Mormon missionaries



who came to his door when he was a young professor
at Valparaiso University in northern Indiana.

He invited them in and they talked together about the Mormon faith.

Gene invited them to return the next day

so that *he* could talk about *his* faith as a Lutheran Christian.

They agreed.

The first day, Gene listened respectfully;

the next day the missionaries came back and listened to *him*.

On the third day, the missionaries were back with reinforcements;

They had called in the regional commander from Chicago!

The three of them then met with Gene, and after that they just gave up,
and he never saw them again (!)

Now probably this would be a better story

if the three Mormons had ended up Lutheran.
That didn't happen.
Neither did my husband-to-be convert to the Mormon faith.

None of the conversation partners had gotten the change of heart and mind they might have been looking for.
But in sharing faith with one another they “brought the edges together”, and, at the very least, learned something about the other and the other's faith.



This congregation helps to support the work of Dirk and Sarah Stadlander, who are missionaries in Senegal with our national church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Dirk and Sarah are very clear about how and why they are in Senegal: How? It is at the request of the church in Senegal they they are there. Why? The purpose of their ministry is to accompany the people of Senegal – building relationships with Christians, Muslims, and practitioners of traditional Senegalese religion, both serving them as they can *and* receiving -- learning from their ways of encountering and interpreting God in their unique context.



The Stadtlanders, like other ELCA missionaries, are not about swooping in to bring God to the people of Senegal. Theirs is a respectful ministry of sharing between equals. But this isn't the picture of missionaries that some of us have grown up with.



Like the man in John's story about Jesus and the man blind from birth, we are all born blind – spiritually blind – and we need spiritual insight to see where our feet are headed. And like the religious leaders in the man's community, we can turn up deaf, too – because all too often, we refuse to listen.

Like that pastor in Gainesville, Florida. Terry Jones is an extreme example, I hope, but he's caused a lot of damage. He's the one who burned a Quran last month and posted a photo of it on the website of his church's *Dove World Outreach Center*.

This torching of Islam's holy book – which, by the way, contains the stories of the patriarchs held sacred by *Christians and Jews* as well as Muslims – set off a deadly protest this week in northern Afghanistan, leaving 5 demonstrators dead, 7 U.N. employees killed, and 73 others injured.

The Pakistani president, a Muslim, spoke out against what he called (quote) “the deliberate desecration of the holy Quran by a fanatic in Florida....We condemn this act in the strongest possible words...It is a

serious setback to the efforts at promoting harmony among civilized communities throughout the world.” (end quote)

There is a bumper sticker that has been around for a while – long enough for all kinds of variations, both clever and crude, to start crop up.



My guess is you’ve seen it in one form or another. (Am I right?)
The religious symbols on it represent several world religions and spell out the word “COEXIST.”

The first symbol, which is the shape of the letter “C”,
is the sign of Islam.

The “O” is a wheel of some kind and it stands for Buddhism.

The “E” represents ecology...

or I’ve also seen it as $e=mc^2$ to stand for science.

The Star of David represents the Jewish faith, of course,
and is roughly the shape of a “Z.”

The dot over the “I” stand for the Bahai faith from Iran.

The yin-yang “S” is for Taoism.

And the “T” is our familiar Christian cross.

COEXIST.

For some, this seems to say,

“All religion is the same.

Let’s just recognize that and strive to live in peace.”

To others,

it suggests an attack on Christianity, just to picture the symbols of other faith traditions alongside the cross.

“Other religions are so wrong. Why should we have to coexist with them?” some say.

Might there be a third way? Could the message of “COEXIST” really be less than meets the eye. Maybe the bumper sticker means just what it says: Let’s live together in peace and rediscover a focus on the basics of kindness, humility, mutual respect, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

It’s good to be eager to share the hope that is within us – that God loved the world so much that God sent Jesus to save *everyone*. But as disciples with big shoes to fill, we are called to be humble as well as passionate and steadfast. It is always wise to listen before we speak, to hear the conversation partner *before* we expect them to listen to us. They might have something to say that we need to hear, after all.

We are, as Paul reminds us, called not to the work of annihilation, but of reconciliation – bringing the edges *together*. Truly sharing faith with respect and open ears, minds, and hearts.

Christ, help us to do this, that we might be your disciples making a difference in this world. Amen.